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# Innovative Family-Centered Practices in Personnel Preparation

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*Mary M. Murray & Colleen J. Mandell*

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## Program Context

Although early childhood special education recommended practices and professional standards support the use of family-centered practices in intervention service delivery, empirical investigations have concluded that providers either do not value such practices or lack the skills necessary to build and maintain parent-professional partnerships. Given that preservice programs tend to rely on field-based experiences as the pedagogical forum for providing preservice students experiences with families (Miller & Stayton, 1996), they are less likely to develop family-centered dispositions and skill sets (Rosenkoetter & Stayton, 1997).

While families increasingly are becoming more involved in preservice education, overall family participation is minimal (Knight & Wadsworth, 1998). This manuscript describes how one early childhood special education personnel preparation program developed a Family-Centered Preservice Model (FCPM) and measured its impact on program graduates. The FCPM was an outcome of two Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) personnel preparation grants, Project ENHANCE (1997-2000) and Project FOCUS (1998-2001), awarded to a Northwest Ohio State University. Both projects were de-

signed to prepare candidates to work with children, birth to eight years, with intensive/low-incidence disabilities and their families.

The FCPM was predicated on the following tenets. First, given that preservice students need opportunities to interact with families in order to acquire a family-centered skill set, family involvement, as well as demonstrations of effective parent professional partnerships, would be embedded in all coursework (Capone & diVenere, 1998). Second, given the likelihood that students would not experience recommended practices in their field experiences, seminars would become the venue for modeling a variety of strategies that promote partnerships with families (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Operating from this framework, the FCPM was constructed utilizing a community of practice paradigm (Wesley & Buysse, 2001) that involved administrators of programs providing field-based experiences to students, family consumers, and early childhood special education faculty who met as a group quarterly to monitor program development and implementation and individually with the Project Director (second author of this manuscript) on a monthly basis.

## ***Family-Centered Preservice Model (FCPM) Program Features***

### *Program Coursework*

The FCPM was a five-semester masters' level program reflecting the Division for Ear-

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mary M. Murray, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, P.O. Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402. Mmmurray@uncg.edu Phone 336-256-1370

ly Childhood's (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) standards, with the first half focusing on content-based coursework, e.g., typical development, low-incidence assessment and intervention service delivery, and collaboration. The second half was comprised of practicum and internship experiences in nine community-based programs serving families from diverse backgrounds, including infant/toddler intervention programs, inclusive preschool and primary classrooms, three family support and mentoring programs administered by parents, itinerant programs for young children with sensory impairments, a pediatric day treatment program and a program for young children with autism.

Recognizing the likelihood that students would most likely have limited opportunities to experience quality family-centered practices in their field placements, a reflective supervision model (Fenichel, 1992) was implemented to bridge the gap between research and practice. Faculty and parent dyads co-facilitated weekly seminars structured to promote reflection and dialogue through the use of reflective journaling, problem-based case studies, and peer-mediated supervision. Seminars focused on strategizing how to use family-centered practices in field experiences that at times presented more challenges than opportunities.

#### *Family Involvement*

Recognizing the value of involving families from the program's inception, the Project Director partnered with parents who were administrators of community-based programs to identify a diverse group of parents who might be interested in joining the FCPM Parent Advisory Board. Five mothers and two fathers of children with low-incidence disabilities committed to meeting quarterly with the Project Director to identify opportunities and strategies for modeling family-centered practices throughout the preservice program. The Advisory Board also worked with faculty on a course-by-course basis to identify measurable, performance-based student outcomes reflecting DEC and NAEYC standards.

### **Family-Centered Personnel Preparation** Murray & Mandell

**Table 1.** Types of Family Involvement in FCPM

Type of Involvement	Number (n =65)	(%)
Advisory Board member identifying course content, partnership strategies and performance-based outcomes	7	11%
Instructor teaching semester-long course	2	3%
Co-instructor w/faculty teaching semester-long course	3	5%
Co-instructor w/faculty teaching one class session	7	11%
Co-facilitator w/faculty at weekly field-base seminars	6	9%
Presenter of topical information	30	46%
Co-presenter w/community provider of topical information	8	12%
Fathers' Panel member	6	9%
Siblings' Panel member	9	14%

*Note.* Some family members were involved in more than one type of instruction.

Table 1 lists how families were involved in preservice instruction. Over four years, 65 family members, representing 40 families, participated in the FCPM. While the majority of family members were mothers of children with disabilities, 19% were fathers, 14% were siblings, and 12% were children with disabilities. Further, 69% of the participants were women and 43% had diverse backgrounds. All members were paid a consultation fee funded with grant monies for their participation, with the exception of course instructors and co-instructors who were paid based on the university's customary fee structure determined by experience and rank.

#### **Outcome Data**

Three full-time cohorts graduated from the FCPM in 1999, 2000, and 2001, respectively. A total of 22 out of a potential 23 graduates participated in a qualitative study designed to measure their perceptions of the preservice program's impact on their current job performance. There were ten preschool teachers, four primary teachers, two early interventionists, four program administrators, one university instructor, and one adapted physical education teacher. Participants,

**TESE, Volume 28, No. 1**  
Winter 2005

ranging from 24 to 50 years, held positions in socio-economically diverse communities located in 6 states. Half had an undergraduate degree in special education and the remainder a degree in early childhood or elementary education. Over 63% had paid experience in either early childhood or early childhood special education prior to entering the masters program.

To assess the effectiveness of the FCPM in preparing program graduates to value and use family-centered practices, the first author of this manuscript interviewed participants, with each individualized interview lasting one to two hours. Participants were provided a verbatim transcript of their interview to verify content accuracy, with changes made as recommended. The authors, as well as independent researcher not involved in the FCPM, read all transcripts, using a system of analytic files, memos, and coding schemes to classify and organize content.

An analysis of the data indicated that participants perceived themselves as valuing and using family-centered practices on the job. However, only two participants reported working in settings where peers and administrators supported the use of family-centered practices. When asked to identify the types of family involvement opportunities they had in their undergraduate programs, only 23% of the participants indicated having such opportunities. They further reported that these interactions were limited to parents of children encountered in their student teaching internship. In the absence of family-centered undergraduate instruction, almost 70% of participants reported relying on their own personal family experiences as a framework for working with families.

All participants attributed their confidence and skill in building on the job partnerships with a diverse group of families to their graduate studies program, repeatedly emphasizing the intense involvement of families in every aspect of the program. Further they indicated that opportunities to observe professional-parent interactions in the university classroom contributed to their use of family-centered practices on the job. Throughout the course of each interview, references to all the family involvement activities listed in Table 1 were made.

When asked if they experienced a particularly significant family-involvement pre-service event, responses varied. For some participants a single event, such as the Fathers' Panel, influenced decisions made in the work setting. However, all participants acknowledged that it was the overall, day-to-day involvement with families that shaped their attitudes and practices. With respect to pedagogy, participants indicated that the weekly seminars that addressed practices occurring in their field experiences prepared them to minimize or circumvent discrepancies between recommended and actual practices as experienced in their jobs.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Although previous studies have identified the need for family participation in pre-service education, findings of this study provide direction on how to involve families, as well as design pedagogy, to promote graduates' use of family-centered practices on-the-job. It seems that both quantity and variety of interactions contributed to on-the-job practices, i.e., not only do preservice students need multiple interactions with families, but they also need an array of experiences depicting different aspects of service delivery, as illustrated by the finding that for some participants, the impact of a single experience, such as the Fathers' Panel, continued to influence job performance, despite the fact that it had been three years since their graduation.

The literature has documented the common preservice practice of relying on field experiences to provide students with opportunities to interact with families, resulting in perpetuating the use of program-centered practices. However, it appears accompanying seminars designed to provide students with opportunities to identify and practice using problem-solving strategies to minimize or circumvent barriers experienced in the field were generalized to the work setting. This finding suggests that preservice programs can actually prepare students to use family-centered practices despite lack of exposure to such practices in their field experiences.

Preservice instructional activities demonstrating respectful partnerships with families from diverse backgrounds reinforced and

supported the participants' commitment to serving families whose culture, race, language and socio-economic status were different from their own. Given the reality that classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse, this finding is encouraging because in the absence of family-centered preservice preparation it seems that professionals tend to use their own family values and experiences as a roadmap for interacting with all families, with little regard for their individuality and background.

While the findings are encouraging, particularly with the recognition that two-thirds of the participants have been working for at least two years since graduating from their masters program and still perceive themselves as valuing and using family-centered practices, the results of this study should be considered as an initial investigative effort. It is important to mention several limitations. First, while participants' attributed their use of family-centered practices on the job to their preservice program, it must be noted that the use of self-reporting as a data collection procedure has limitations. Future studies might include not only program graduates but also their employers or families served as data sources. Second, the FCPM involved 65 family members, all of whom were compensated financially for their efforts. It is recommended that future investigations assess the impact of less resource intensive family involvement service delivery options, ferretting out the impact of different levels or frequency of involvement, as well as assessing types of involvement not included in the FCPM, such as pairing parent mentors with

## Family-Centered Personnel Preparation Murray & Mandell

preservice students as a means to develop an understanding of families.

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Mary M. Murray, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Colleen J. Mandell, Bowling Green State University.